

FAITH IN FLUX

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro

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One of the distinct privileges of leading the Newcomer Seminar during the past twelve years has been listening to the spiritual journey stories of the people who are drawn to our Fellowship. Each story is unique, as was evident in last Sunday's personal accounts by three of our members. And yet, there are also common themes. One of these common themes is a period of **self-chosen exile** from conventional religion. I have been struck by how often newcomers to Unitarian Universalism began to question traditional beliefs at an early age, and who found the responses to their questions unsatisfying. They arrive at the door of our Fellowship looking for a faith community that is different. Another common theme, especially among newcomers from younger generations, is the **absence** of any religious upbringing at all. They arrive at the door of our Fellowship looking for a faith community they have never known before.

The individual stories we share with one another are part of a much larger story: **a sea change** in the very nature of faith in America and around the globe. **What does it mean to "have faith?"** How does our personal faith fit within the grand scheme of the evolution of humankind? How should our faith affect our daily behavior? As Sam Keen says in his inspiring book titled *Hymns to an Unknown God*, "I want to know if I have any gifts that serve a lasting purpose. If I am ever to be at home in the world, I must discover how a single life fits into Life [itself], how my story fits into the universal story." [p. 37] In my monthly sermons during the next seven months, I will offer my ideas about what "faith" means in our time and the many forms that faith can take over the course of a lifetime, sharing the stories of exemplary individuals who have dealt creatively with questions of faith. And of course, I will invite your thoughts as well during our post-sermon discussions. Let me also say that the topic for my sermon today is not what was advertised, simply because I want to lay a firm foundation for my subsequent sermons on the subject of faith.

What is the flux we are witnessing in America religious faith? A recent survey of more than 50,000 people revealed that "the U.S. population continues to show signs of becoming less religious, with one out of every five Americans failing to indicate a religious identity." During the past two decades, those who report no religious affiliation have increased by 20 million, making them the fastest-growing segment of our population. [Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, "American Religious Identification Survey," March 2009] "Americans change religious affiliation early and often. In total, about half of American adults have changed religious affiliation at least once during their lives. Most people who change their religion leave their childhood faith before age 24, and many of those who change religion do so more than once. . . . A significant number of those who left their childhood faith and have become unaffiliated leave open the possibility that they may one day join a religion. Among those who were raised Catholic and Protestant who are now unaffiliated, for example, roughly one-in-three say they have just not found the right religion yet." [Pew Survey on Religion & Public Life, "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S.," www.pewforum.org]

One of the main reasons for the flux in American religious life is the **shift from belief to faith**. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a distinguished historian of religion, draws a sharp distinction between **faith and belief**. Belief, he says, involves assenting intellectually to concepts or propositions as set forth in religious doctrines and creeds. If we concentrate on religious **beliefs**, we are confronted with the **dissimilarities** among different religious traditions. Faith, on the other hand, involves “an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions.” [*Faith and Belief*, p. 12] Faith calls attention to the **similarities** among different traditions. **While beliefs divide, faith unites.**

In his book *The Future of Faith*, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox explains it this way: “It is true that for many people ‘faith’ and ‘belief’ are just two words for the same thing. But they are not the same, and in order to grasp the magnitude of the religious upheaval now under way, it is important to clarify the difference. Faith is about deep-seated confidence. In everyday speech we usually apply it to people we trust or the values we treasure. . . . Belief, on the other hand, is more like an opinion. . . . We can *believe* something to be true without it making much difference to us, but we place our *faith* only in something that is vital for the way we live.” [p. 3] Cox argues that fundamentalism in religion—whether Islamic, Christian, or otherwise—is **dying**. “Fundamentalisms, with their insistence on obligatory belief systems, their nostalgia for a mythical uncorrupted past, their claims to an exclusive grasp on truth, and—sometimes—their propensity for violence, are turning out to be rearguard attempts to stem a more sweeping tidal change.” [p. 2] Shortly before his death, Aldous Huxley wrote a utopian novel titled *Island*, in which his fictional characters offer the following prayer: “Give us this day our daily faith, but deliver us from beliefs.” [quoted by Cox, p. 213]

The crucial religious challenge of our time is **not** the issue of belief versus disbelief, but the tension between faith and cynicism, between hope and despair. If Unitarian Universalism is to become, in the words of our newly elected president Peter Morales, “the religion for our time,” what will that entail? What are the hallmarks of a faith that will sustain us into an uncertain future? As a preview to my monthly sermons over the next seven months, let me offer these three features of a faith for our time (summarized as the 3 R’s):

- (1) **Reverence** for our unity with nature and humankind in all of their marvelous variety
- (2) **Responsibility** for protecting and preserving our world for future generations
- (3) **Respect** for the ultimate mystery of the meaning of existence

In laying this foundation, I found myself drawn to the exemplary thinking of Albert Einstein, who was not only the most brilliant physicist of our time, but also a deeply reflective philosopher. On the subject of our unity with nature and humankind, he wrote: “A human being is part of a whole, called by us the ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” [*Ideas and Opinions*, p.]

On the subject of our responsibility for future generations, Einstein said, “Concern for man himself and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavors, concern for the great unsolved problems of the organization of labor and the distribution of goods—in order

that the creations of our mind shall be a blessing and not a curse to mankind.” [address at California Institute of Technology, 1931] It was Einstein who first sent a letter directly to President Franklin Roosevelt, warning him of the enormous destructive potential of nuclear energy as a weapon of mass destruction. After the United States became the only nation ever to harness that destructive power in warfare, Einstein led the movement of world scientists in an effort to control its spread to other nations—an effort that has ultimately proved to be futile as more nations attempt to this day to add nuclear weapons to their arsenal.

For a man who came closer than any other human being to penetrating the deepest secrets of the physical universe, Albert Einstein’s respect for the ultimate mystery of existence is all the more remarkable. He wrote, “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced, there is something our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and in these sense only, I am a devoutly religious man.” [quoted in Cox, p. 21]

“A mystery is not something anyone solves,” says Harvey Cox. “It is something we live with, and people find that this mystery touches them in different ways. Albert Einstein’s primary experience of mystery came from his encounter with the intricacy of the natural world. But people discover the mystery in other places as well. Many find it in more than one. Like Einstein, they marvel at the awesome scope and complexity of the universe. But they also find the mystery he spoke of in their encounters with other people and in reflecting on themselves.” [Cox, p. 24] As Sam Keen puts it, “In truth, we cannot **know** enough to be either theists or atheists. We have no alternative except to **decide** whether to trust or mistrust this encompassing mystery. It seems to me that the best theological position is one that combines agnosticism with trust. I choose to trust the surrounding mystery out of which I emerged and into which I will disappear in death and to rest secure within the darkness of the unknowable One.” [*Hymns to an Unknown God*, p. 69]

Such a paradoxical faith—a faith that revolves around mystery rather than certainty—is not for everyone. At its core is a profound faith in the unity of existence and a deep commitment to practice unity in our everyday lives. As Paul Razor says in his book *Faith Without Certainty*, “The way we live our lives names our theologies more effectively than any label we can give them. If we name a theology of love but treat people with disrespect, if we name a theology of interdependence but insist on our own independence, if we name a theology of inclusion but think we need to make all the important decisions, we are out of sync. . . . The things we do, the things we go along with, the things we are silent about, these are all a part of the faith we name and practice.” [p. xxii] In the months ahead, I will challenge you to think about what your faith is, and offer my thoughts about the dimensions of faith that you may want to explore.

Let me close by inviting you to join in a responsive reading of selection # 529 by Rabindranath Tagore, whose writing had a profound influence on Albert Einstein.

Responsive Reading # 529